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ABSTRACT

When parents are knowledgeable about the skills, qualities, and knowledge that primary-grade children acquire at school, they are better able to support their child and their child's school. This brochure provides information for parents on how a high quality primary school can help children learn, and describes how a developmentally appropriate classroom approaches intellectual, social and emotional, physical, and language development in the primary grades. The brochure also discusses connections within the primary school curriculum areas of language and literacy skills, mathematics, science, social studies, and the arts. In addition, the brochure contrasts developmentally appropriate and inappropriate primary grade educational practices. A list of additional readings and resources available through the National Association for the Education of Young Children concludes the brochure. (KB)

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A Good Primary School for Your Child

ED 425 841

Marilyn Smith

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It's 8:00 and your child is ready for school. She's still small enough to cuddle on your lap, and at bedtime clings to her shabby teddy bear, but as she walks out the front door each morning, she sets off on her own—unafraid. Like an astronaut, poised to take a walk in space, she knows she is connected to home base by a strong tether she can count on. She relies on this sturdy connection—and on your years of training and hard work—to give her the security she needs to take the leap into uncharted space.

Bolstered by your love and support, your daughter has a sense of herself as an able learner. She is prepared to enter a school environment that nurtures children's innate abilities, opens their minds to new possibilities, and challenges them to go to the next level.

In a world of rapidly advancing technology and information, our children encounter knowledge and use tools not dreamed of even a generation ago. To apply what they know to new situations, our children must have real understanding and solid skills, not facts learned by rote and forgotten right after the test. Like members of a space mission that depends on teamwork, our children must learn to work well with others in and out of school and for their future work lives.

These are the kinds of skills, qualities, and knowledge that primary-grade children acquire in a school program of the kind described here. When we parents support this kind of schooling, our children are more likely to get it. And with this kind of education in the early grades, children—like space-age explorers—are fully prepared for adventures in learning and life.

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Brochure design: Sandi Collins.

National Association for the Education of Young Children

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HOW A GOOD PRIMARY SCHOOL HELPS CHILDREN LEARN

Around the time children begin elementary school, their brains and bodies change in ways that greatly affect the way they learn. For instance, at about age 6, vision becomes sufficiently coordinated for children to focus well on printed text.

Crucial cognitive growth occurs, too. The tissue connecting the two halves of the brain is now fully developed, allowing children to process information more quickly. Thinking and reasoning mature, too, and children become more capable of thinking about ideas, dealing with symbols, and solving problems. These developments enable them to use the mental operations involved in math, science, and other domains of learning in the primary grades.

Teachers need a solid understanding of developmental changes to provide learning experiences that are both meaningful and challenging to children. Classrooms that do this are *developmentally appropriate*—they offer learning experiences and materials that are safe, healthy, interesting, achievable, and also challenging to children of this age.

- A good school values each child for who she is. Teachers in developmentally appropriate schools set high standards for every child's learning. Yet, aware of the great individual differences in children, they tailor learning goals and methods to each child. They use a wide variety of materials and strategies to help them identify children's individual strengths and learning needs and to enable each child to progress optimally.

- Primary-grade children need one-on-one time with their teachers. And they benefit from working in small groups, actively investigating things, doing research, and engaging in hands-on projects and activities.

- The school is a democratic, caring community with a high level of family involvement. Children benefit from continual "conversation" between the school and their families. Teachers gain valuable information and insights when we parents share information about our children. And when we feel truly welcome in our child's school, we are true partners in our children's education.

Supporting Children's Learning

Here's how a developmentally appropriate classroom approaches the key areas of learning and development in the primary grades:

Intellectual development

- Children in grades one through three have reasoning capabilities that younger children lack. They now can logically think through problems and concepts, and do so when these are concrete. They benefit from educational experiences in which their thinking is stretched and challenged through hands-on learning and interaction with teachers and classmates.

- During the primary grades, children's attention span and long- and short-term memory greatly improves. Teachers gear activities to this increasing ability to concentrate. For instance, third-graders can be expected to read by themselves for much longer than can first-graders. Teachers know that children this age remember new information when it's related to something they already know. So children frequently work on long-term projects, studying something in depth instead of covering a large number of unrelated topics—"a mile wide and an inch deep"—in a rigid curriculum.

Social and emotional development

- During the primary grades, children begin to more realistically assess their strengths, capabilities, and weaknesses. They compare themselves to other children, sometimes focusing on their weaknesses. A competitive classroom atmosphere magnifies children's tendency to judge themselves in terms of what others can do; some children quit trying because they're convinced they can't succeed. To ensure that all children come to see themselves as competent learners, good teachers foster a sense of classroom community. They deemphasize competition, acknowledge each child's accomplishments and contributions, and encourage respect for and support of one another.

- Children in the early grades have a strong urge to master skills they see adults using. Good teachers tap into this desire to learn by giving each child the opportunities and support he needs to attain goals that are just within his reach. They do not underestimate children, nor do they pressure them to acquire skills beyond their abilities.

- During the primary years, children develop their first truly reciprocal friendships. Kids can now settle disputes on their own, and they have a growing ability to interact and work effectively with their peers. Teachers nurture these important social skills by giving children collaborative tasks.

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Physical development

- Primary-grade children are well coordinated. They now can run, skip, jump, and turn somersaults with ease. In fact, long periods of sitting fatigue kids this age more than physical activity. Thus, the classroom's daily schedule includes gym or outdoor time. With their increasing intellectual and social skills, children enjoy physical games with rules, such as kickball or soccer.

- Children's small-motor skills become more refined, so they can draw with more detail and write more legibly for longer periods of time. Primary-age children understand that we write to communicate, and teachers support and nurture their growing abilities as writers.

Language development

- A 6- to 8-year-old's vocabulary increases about 20 words a day—if she's in an environment rich in experiences with language and books. Teachers continually introduce new words related to what the children are studying. They also begin to talk about words themselves; for instance, they show children how parts of words have meanings, which helps kids understand new words they come across. By initiating cooperative small-group projects that engage children in collaboration and dialogue, teachers further promote language development.

- As children begin to read, experiences with books also expand their vocabulary. That, in turn, improves their reading. With this in mind, teachers help children choose books that interest them, so they will be motivated to read. As each child progresses, teachers suggest more challenging books so that the children advance to a higher reading level. Children's use of language is also stretched and refined as they write and share their work with each other.

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RICULUM CONNECTIONS

The human brain, when presented with new information, seeks meaningful connections. A curriculum provides such connections when children use skills and knowledge from one subject area to help them understand another. The school and the teacher set clear learning goals for reading, writing, math, science, social studies, physical education, and the arts, but they know that children acquire knowledge and skills through studying topics in some depth. In a third-grade study of the country and culture of China, for instance, children read stories about China and perhaps write their own Chinese legends. They learn history and geography and use their math skills to make maps of Asia. They also can draw their own versions of Chinese wall hangings and perhaps investigate the scientific principles governing the Chinese water clock.

All aspects of curriculum are covered in a developmentally appropriate program.

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY SKILLS

Most children learn to read between the ages of 6 and 8. The classroom is filled with print: shelves of children's literature and nonfiction, posters and charts, and, of course, examples of the children's own written work. Emerging writing and reading skills are put to use in making lists, writing and sending mail, recording observations, and other real-life purposes that make sense to children. In many ways every day, they see why we need to read and write.

Through these experiences children also begin to understand how print on a page relates to meaning. As engaged readers and writers, they begin to understand how written language works. Instruction in phonics and other word-identification skills are part—though only part—of a comprehensive reading program. Good teachers integrate reading and writing into all parts of the curriculum, such as science and social studies.

MATHEMATICS

Teachers use math manipulatives, such as Cuisenaire rods and Unifix cubes, to help children gain understanding of mathematical concepts through hands-on exploration. Children learn basic concepts such as number and operations and apply these concepts in solving problems. Teachers introduce noncompetitive math games and integrate relevant math activities into other areas of study. Math is used for a wide range of purposes, from gathering and charting data in an environmental project to planning the amount of food to take on a field trip.

SCIENCE

Science is a major part of the curriculum. Using the "scientific method," children make hypotheses based on what they know already, observe phenomena, gather and analyze data, and draw conclusions based on their observations. Teachers offer materials for investigation, such as magnets, magnifying materials, plants and animals to study and care for, and they make use of the local outdoor environment. Age-appropriate science books are available to the children.

SOCIAL STUDIES

Projects in social studies provide an excellent opportunity for integrated study across subject domains, and children often work on a project for an extended period of time. In social studies children learn history, geography, economics, and civics, and they use their reading, writing, and computer skills as well. Teachers also bring in relevant art, music, dance, drama, and other activities.

ART, MUSIC, DRAMA, AND DANCE

The visual and performing arts are regarded as a crucial part of the overall curriculum. At times teachers focus on the arts individually, but frequently they integrate them into other areas of the curriculum, such as social studies or language arts. The school values children's artistic expressions: kids are given frequent opportunities to perform, and their artwork is displayed in the classroom and throughout the school.

What you want to see		What you don't want to see
Classes are small enough that teachers can work with children individually and in small groups.	Classes are large and unwieldy, and teachers spend a lot of time disciplining the children.	Class size is reasonable, but teachers still spend most of their time addressing the children as a whole group.
The school environment is safe and comfortable, with enough space that children do not feel crowded. The building and grounds are cheerful and child-friendly.	The school is overcrowded. It looks dingy and has the feel of not being "kept up"—or even being unsafe.	The school is overly neat and quiet for a place where children are supposed to stretch their minds.
A flexible arrangement of tables or desks enables children to work alone or in small groups. During periods of the day, children are free to move around the room to choose materials or work on projects.	Children sit at desks in rows facing the teacher at all times. Teachers rely heavily on workbooks and textbooks.	Children can move about freely, but the curriculum is unfocused and the classroom is chaotic. There are no stimulating materials for them to use.
Teachers and children function as a community in which everyone feels respected and accepted. Children learn to think about how their actions affect others.	Teachers do little to create a sense of community in the class or to involve children in collaborative work; they separate friends and stress the importance of "individual work."	Teachers do not help children with limited social skills to find a place in the group, so these children remain isolated from or rejected by their peers.
Throughout the day teachers interact with children to stimulate their thinking and learning. For instance, they ask thought-provoking questions and add new elements of challenge to a task.	Teachers do not interact much with individual children, lecturing instead to the whole group or assigning worksheets.	Teachers talk to the children individually but rarely do more than repeat instructions or tell children when they are "right" or "wrong."
The schedule is flexible enough to allow children ample time to do in-depth work on projects and to engage in sustained periods of silent reading and writing.	The daily schedule is very rigid, with specific amounts of time devoted to separate areas of study. Kids frequently can't finish what they're doing because "time is up."	Teachers don't establish any schedule. Children never know what's coming next and cannot prepare themselves for transition.
Teachers make the most of primary-age children's desire to learn by providing challenging, interesting tasks and materials. Teachers encourage kids to work to their potential.	Teachers rely heavily on external rewards (stickers, candy, and the like) or threats of punishment to get children to behave appropriately or perform tasks.	Teachers don't give clear instructions or feedback, so the children aren't sure what's required of them.
Teachers encourage children to work through problems with one another so they can learn important social skills, such as negotiation and cooperation. But if children fight, bully, or exclude other children, teachers intervene. They know how to help children behave in a socially productive way.	Because teachers don't allow the children to interact with each other very often, kids rarely have the opportunity to practice social skills.	Teachers think children should always be allowed to "work things out themselves." They don't intervene when a student bullies or hurts another child.
Teachers plan a clear curriculum with coherent learning goals. The curriculum is flexible enough to adapt to children's interests, personal experiences, and home situations.	Teachers have a rigid curriculum based on textbooks and workbooks that bear little or no connection to the children's lives and interests.	Teachers have no clear curriculum or goals. They do not follow up on lessons, and the class jumps from one subject to another without any apparent plan.
Teachers and parents share useful, specific feedback about individual children's learning and development. Children's progress is communicated in language parents understand.	Children's performance is reported to parents only in letter or number grades, which do not give parents helpful information about children's capabilities and areas of difficulty.	Teachers do not evaluate children's work or progress in any way, so parents lack information about how the child is doing or how well the teacher and school are doing their job.
Parents and teachers are in frequent contact. Teachers know that parents can provide much valuable information about their children; parents feel that their input is welcome and that the teachers have their children's best interests at heart.	The teacher (or principal) does not make parents feel welcome, keeping them at a distance or inviting them to school only for special performances or yearly conferences.	Teachers are intimidated by parents. Because they continually shift their approach or policies at parents' request, the curriculum and classroom direction become unfocused.

IN YOUR CHILD'S CLASSROOM . . .

FURTHER READINGS/RESOURCES FROM NAEYC

Bredekamp, S., & C. Copple, eds. 1997. *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs.* Rev. ed. [book]. NAEYC order #234.

Testing of young children: Concerns and cautions [brochure]. NAEYC order #582.

Young Children [bimonthly magazine with articles of interest to teachers and parents]. Call the NAEYC Membership Department at 202-232-8777 or 800-424-2460 (ext. 614) for information about how to receive this membership benefit.

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NAEYC order #579. Single copies of this brochure are 50¢ each; 100 copies are $10. Other brochures currently available in this series: *A Good Preschool for Your Child* (NAEYC order #517) and *A Good Kindergarten for Your Child* (NAEYC order #524).

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